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The Role of Woman in Building Cultural Heritage of India

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Abstract:

In our Hindu Law Manu had made such a remark: To him, gods rejoice there where women are duly honoured. He also added in this connection that if women in the society lament and are tortured, the whole kingdom will suffer owing to this leading to its complete annihilation. At the moment we do not want to judge the justifiability of such statements in details, but at best it can be said that the position of the women in ancient society was not totally neglected as it is commonly thought of. We come across the icon of *Ardhanārīśvara*, which is in fact a combination of half male and half female. Such an icon is of very much significance on the ground that it indicates the role of woman in our life. If a woman wants to exercise her freedom, nobody will go to resist her. Historical account shows that in India there were many women who exercised their freedom in a full-fledged manner. It is believed in Indian culture that the Divine Energy (*Śakti*) is manifested as the Ultimate female power in Hindu cosmology. She creates, destroys and exhibits a fierce power over all of creation. If they have such a confidence, power given to them will be utilized for the welfare of the women as well as the country. I am personally looking forward towards this 'dawn' of their own glorious identity lost now-a-days due to various socio-political problems.

Key-words: *Sakti, Ardhanārīśvara, Ardhānginī, Bhāryā, Patnī*

The word which is much discussed and debated in modern time is 'Women Empowerment', which is very much related to our all-round development. No nation can prosper if its women are not empowered or not given proper recognition. In our Hindu Law Manu had made such a remark: To him, gods rejoice there where women are duly honoured (*yatra nāryastu pūjyante ramante tatra devatāḥ*)¹ He also added in this connection that if women in the society lament and are tortured, the whole kingdom will suffer owing to this leading to its complete annihilation. At the moment we do not want to judge the justifiability of such statements in details, but at best it can be said that the position of the women in ancient society was not totally neglected as it is commonly thought of. This paper is an attempt to show the power and honour the women-in-general with special reference to our cultural heritage of India and also to throw some light on their position and values in restoring social, moral and national values.

II

In Indian tradition women are always respected. We come across the icon of *Ardhanārīśvara*, which is in fact a combination of half male and half female. Such an icon is very much significance on the ground that it indicates the role of woman in our life. It is a symbolic representation of the fact that the male is a self which requires the other as its complement. One without the other is not alone incomplete but imperfect. The imperfection of the male without female has been elaborated in different ways in our tradition. This indispensability of male with female and the *vice-versa* has been pointed out by the poets with different metaphors. Kālidasa begins his famous *Kumārasambhava* with metaphors through which the indispensability of male and female has been eulogised. The male and female have been metaphorized first as Pārvatī and

Parameśvara and secondly as *vāk* (speech) and *artha* (meaning). The icon of *Ardhanārīśvara* also signifies the fact that each and every individual, male or female, is not complete in his/ her lone existence in the sense that a male or a female is essentially an admixture of maleness and femininity. In fact, both the properties- maleness and femininity remaining in an individual are intertwined in such a way that they can never be separated, just as the inseparability between speech (*vak*) and its meaning (*artha*) or between Pārvatī and Parameśvara. The famous *śloka* runs as follows: “*vāgārthaviva samprktau vāgartha-pratipattayel jagatah pitarau bande Pārvatī-Parameśvarau*”² Let us try to understand the metaphor of Pārvatī and Parameśvara according to the Indian tradition. The union of Pārvatī and Parameśvara has made the situation a complete whole as if they are not two but one. Because they remain in such a way that it seems to be complementing each other. The beauty of totality has been contributed by the two. If there is any beauty in the unified picture, it is very difficult to understand the superiority of one upon the other. Even if there is an awareness of the two, it is not possible to know who is more beautiful. Both are combined and the combined form is matched in such a way as if they have an equal contribution to the holistic beauty. In this connection the term ‘equal’ means ‘possession of qualities of equally matching’, which again implies the contribution of one is neither less nor more than that of the other. In other words, it is simply impossible to know anything which may help us in ascertaining the points of inequality among them. This has been beautifully explained by Bhāmaha as ‘*anyūṇa-anatirikta*’ (i.e. ‘neither less nor more’).³ The beauty arising from the combination does not give us a scope to understand the less-importance or more-importance of any one in contributing to the same (beauty). This can be applicable to the combined picture of Pārvatī and Parameśvara in one hand and a word (*vāk*) and its meaning (*artha*) on the other. The ideal beauty in literary form of art lies in the perfect combination of a word and its meaning. How to judge such perfection? It is spontaneously known

from the beauty of a word and its meaning. It should be used in such a manner that a connoisseur would be confused through the originated beauty and at the same time he would not be in a position to determine whose contribution is more in bringing out the beauty. A word seems to be challenging its meaning and the vice-versa (*paraspar-spardhitva-ramaṇīya*) so far as their beauty is concerned. The same theory is applicable to the unified form of Pārvaṭī and Parameśvara in which the beauty of Pārvaṭī, as if, is challenging that of Parameśvara and the *vice-versa*. This beauty, I think, may be extended to the unified character of maleness and femininity available in an individual being. Such a woman or man is really a combination of both the characteristics in which no one is less important than the other. Just as a word and its meaning, and Pārvaṭī and Parameśvara are made for each other so far as their holistic beauty is concerned, an individual would ideally be taken beautiful if both parts of her/his being worked equally and challengingly. This is, in short, is the story behind the icon of *Ardhvanārīśvara*. The idea of *Ardhanārīśvara* involves in two aspects of one Ultimate Being. In the inactive or negative aspect of all creative impulses remain dormant and the whole universe lies as a mere possibility. In the negative aspect *Śakti* remains perfectly absorbed in the Lord as if they are embraced deeply. The union of *Śakti* and *Śiva* is the basis of the concept of *Ardhanārīśvara*. As each and every human being is the temple of *Ardhanārīśvara*, this represents the dual personality of human being. In the concept of *Ardhanārīśvara*, the male and the female deity have got the equal status. "The male and female represent in the visible world the division which is present in the nature of the Absolute as *Śiva* and *Śakti*; and the perfect union of the *Śiva* and *Śakti* is the highest reality. In Sahajiyā Buddhism *śūṇyatā* (void) and *karuṇā* (compassion) transformed as the *prajñā* and *upāya* as the two aspects of ultimate reality, these aspects are similar to *Śakti* and *Śiva* concept".⁴

In this connection it is to be noted that in Indian tradition a wife is called 'ardhānginī' i.e. half of the husband's being. It is due to the fact that an individual was not allowed to perform sacrificial rituals without the association of the wife and by way of doing this a wife would become worthy of availing half of her husband's merit (*puṇya*) generated from the performance of the sacrifice. For this reason, a wife was called 'the half of his being' ('ardhānginī'). For the term 'wife' many synonyms are available in Indian tradition like 'bhāryā', 'patnī', 'kalatra' etc. A wife may be designated as 'patnī' if and only if she is associated at the time of the performance of the sacrificial rituals. If she is not allowed to do so, she may be called wife in the sense of 'bhāryā' or 'kalatra', but not 'patnī'. This thesis is evidenced from the *sūtra* of Pāṇini- 'patyurna yajūa-samyoge' i.e. the term 'pati' (i.e. husband) may be feminised with adding a suffix 'na' i.e. 'pati + na' leading to the formation of the term 'patnī' (wife) if she is associated with the performance of the sacrifice (*yajña-samyoga*). In fact, when a wife is designated as 'patnī', she becomes the half of her husband in terms of achieving merits of the sacrifice.

In other traditions also a wife is accepted as half of the male or husband but at the same time the femininity is glorified by saying that it is not only a half, but a 'better half'. Though we do not get any evidence of such statement in Indian scriptural tradition, sometimes the public usages (*loka-vyavahāra*) have been recognised as a part of culture. Hence such glorification of the ladies may be accepted as a part of our Indian culture, though the famous icon of *Ardhvanārīśvara* does not entail the better or worse half of the united whole. If the female is regarded as 'better', it would go against the thesis already propounded in context of *Ardhvanārīśvara*. However, the term 'better' may be admitted as a special honour to the woman. Such honourable addresses are also found elsewhere when a wife is called as identified with the 'house' (*grhinī grhamucyate*). The existence of a house without a wife is meaningless,

because it is wife who makes the house worth-living or meaningful. A house is considered as identified with a wife after considering her importance of presence there and her contributions to lead a family life, which may otherwise be called 'homely life'. This is also a kind of honour attributed to the ladies in Indian tradition.

Though it is true that women were highly honoured in Indian culture, some of the scholars are of the opinion that in some specific cases a great injustice had been towards the ladies. We may cite the observation of Professor L.D. Barnett regarding the position of the ladies in ancient Indian culture. He observes: "With the father of the household was associated with the mother, who received as much, and sometimes even more, reverence. Women *per se* however did not rank high in the eye of law, which laid down as a principle that a woman is for all her life in tutelage, first to her father, then to her husband, and lastly to her son. A wife who bore only daughter or no children at all could be superseded by her husband marrying other woman, who then took preference of her. Even under the most favourable situation the nuptial bed was not one of the roses for the wife. She was expected to show her devotion to her husband by the most humble and minute services, preparing all the meals of the household, eating the food left by her husband and sons, washing kitchen vessels, smearing the floor with burn cow-dung, and respectfully embracing her lord's feet at bed time."⁵

The picture as shown above is not the real picture of all women in our tradition. Some of the statements found in Hindu law have been misinterpreted by the later thinkers. The opt-quoted statement of Manu that women have no freedom (*na strī svātantryam arhati*) has been taken as true by Dr. Barnett. But actually, the term *arhati* bears a special significance from the standpoint of morality. If a woman wants to exercise her freedom, nobody will go to resist her. Historical account shows that in India there were many women who exercised their freedom

in a full-fledged manner. Most of the cases it has been found that they are opted for this according to their own will. In our society no husband orders his wife to take the rejected or uneaten food of her husband and son. It is her noble will or good will not to spoil food in a family which engages her to utilize the food left by her own members. This practice is going on in our family generation after generation by the mother-in-general. If it is said that they are compelled to take food, it is dishonourable to the dignity of a mother. So far as law is concerned, it is true that there were some discriminations for the ladies. Before making a judgement the historical perspective of the time when it was framed is to be looked into. First and foremost, reason of such discrimination was the system of polygamy prevailed at that time. Now the system is not there and hence the legal position of the women is changed. Apart from this, it is believed in Indian culture that the Divine Energy (*Śakti*) is manifested as the Ultimate female power in Hindu cosmology. She creates, destroys and exhibits a fierce power over all of creation. In no way the position of women was inferior in our tradition which is evidenced from the episodes of the learned women like Gārgī and Maitreyī, great mathematicians like Līlāvati, and the experts of comprehensive system of medicine and surgery like Dhanvantarī etc. Considering all these, the general and most honourable term to address a lady is *Devī* i.e. goddess. It is true that women cannot do many things that men do. Their physiology prevents this. That, however, does not prove any inferiority of their parts. We must do something for which we are made and do them well. The relation of man and woman is the expression of the urge for duality. Each is a self which requires the other as its complement. The image available in the temples and caves tells a very glorious picture. In these places a woman is painted as a signified woman in the family and society. The artists use women like flowers; garlands of girls surround their kings and princes, embellish their palaces, dominate their street scenes, crown the windows of their cities and are often painted, as in the

delicious panel in the First cave of the Queen and her maids' giving alms to a mendicant, for the sheer joy of the painting them, and with no perceptible literary or religious intention.⁶

This is an indication towards the fact that both male and female are equal. No male is complete if he is not associated with a female. In the Kenopaniṣad the power of Brahman through which the gods become victorious is nothing the goddess Umā, a female god otherwise called Haimavatī. In this context also even the godliness of god does not remain if he is not graced by the power or energy in the form of Umā. In this section woman power is always appreciated and treated as inevitable in attaining success. The story goes like this. In the fight between gods and demons Brahman with its power defeated demons that destroyed or tried to destroy the moral order established by them. The gods attained victory and forgot the secret of their success i.e., the energy or power existing in them. Without thinking of the Omnipotent Brahman they thought that their mortal bodies are the causes of their victory, which is completely a mistaken notion. Brahman knew this wrong notion of the gods by virtue of being omniscient. Hence, the power of Brahman assumed the form of certain Yakṣa and appeared before them to destroy their misconception.⁷ Due to its peculiar form of Yakṣa the gods fail to understand him. When Agni tried to know this, he was asked who was he. Agni identified himself as Agni and also *Jātavedā* i.e., as knower of everything. Yakṣa enquired of Agni about his power and learn from him that Agni could burn everything. Yakṣa said – "I put here a dried up grass and please try to burn it". Agni approached to the grass and tried to burn the same with all his might and force, but all his efforts were in vain.⁸

Vāyu also had made an abortive attempt to blow a piece of dried grass, which was presented to him as a challenge to his vanity of blowing off anything of this. But it remained intact in spite of best efforts of Vāyu. He

like Agni came back with shame and admitted his inability to understand the exact nature of Yakṣa⁹

Under these circumstances the other gods appealed Indra, the king of gods, to know what Yakṣa is. Honouring the request of the gods Indra approached the Yakṣa. As soon as Indra approached, it vanished, which proves the existence of power of Brahman in Indra, but not in Agni and Vāyu. This *Brahmaśakti* herself appeared in the form of Umā, the most beautiful lady being overwhelmed by the extreme devotion towards Indra. Indra proceeded to the lady of exquisite beauty. Brahman, the light of all lights, shined with an abnormal beauty just a beautiful lady (*vahuśobhamānā*)¹⁰ She possesses the charms of a woman wearing gold ornaments i.e., Haimavatī. In other words, the daughter of Haimavat Mountain is called Haimavatī i.e., Pārvatī, the wife of Śiva. The power of all gods is called *Brahmaśakti*. Umā, Ambikā, Durgā, Kātyāyanī etc. are the different names of one single goddess who is identical with Brahman. Umā is the power of Śiva and these two have their separate entities through the influence of Māyā. Umā is always praised as the repository of all knowledge. From the story narrated in the Kenopaniṣad it is known the *Brahmaśakti* in the form of Umā is the root of all our activities and success. But this *Brahmaśakti* in the form of Umā or Kālī is behind the victory of the gods and the defeat of the demons.¹¹

It is a pity that in modern time women have lost their glorious cultural identity and have to suffer for various reasons like due to the over-dominance of the males or their ego-problem in our society and in other fields. Still now women are tortured as evidenced from the reports of bride-burning, witch-killing etc. Many woman-related cases like rape, sexual harassment, trafficking etc are found in the pages of newspapers. It is pathetic and disheartening indeed that a woman is burnt alive considering her as a witch. I do not know how utopian ideas like witch etc have occupied the rational faculty of a modern human being. No

sensible man, I think, can commit such a heinous activity towards another human being in this age of science and technology. From this it is presumed that if any evil spirit at all exists, it is found among the women alone. This is an invention of the superstitious male leaders alone of our society.

Today women have been considered as commodities or the objects of enjoyment, which is evidenced from the fact of their trafficking to other places. Even if somebody knows that the foetus in the womb is of a girl child, he does not hesitate to kill or destroy it, being unaware of the darker side of such incidents. If these things are allowed to happen or encouraged, it will surely lead to the reduction of femineity. It is a matter of great concern that in Rajasthan and Punjab still the rate of femineity is much less than other parts of the country. If this practice is allowed to continue, it will spread to other parts of the country and gradually to the whole world leading to the eradication of total feminine race.

Moreover, women have got some problems specific in nature, which are understood by themselves alone. They have to pass through three phases of life, first as daughter (*kanya*), second as wife (*jaya*) and third as mother (*janani*). Each and every phase of their life is not free from problems which are different and unique in character and hence cannot be compared with those of males. An unmarried girl (*kanya*) has got certain problems which may not be faced by an unmarried boy. Such is the case with other phases of life also. Now the time has come to understand the problems of the women which, I believe, can be realised and solved by the women themselves if they are given an opportunity. In order to prevent the women-related evils from the society women alone should come forward, initiate a leading part and restore their glorious cultural identity. It is possible if they are given constitutional power. Our country has already started reservation of women representatives in the public policy-making bodies like Panchayats, Assemblies etc after considering

the question of their empowerment. Fortunately, now we find a considerable number of ladies as administrators, police officers, judges, pilots and soldiers. If they are encouraged with legitimate power, they can perform in a better way being free from male-chauvinism. Before considering their security in other domains, they should be provided psychological security so that they are boosted up with their full energy.

Can all-round development of our society be possible without the empowerment of women? Women have got their own ability and power, which needs an outlet of exposure. A nation should look into the matter seriously and create a situation so that they can exert their power administratively and constitutionally.

It has already been said that through counselling and sensitization programme common people are made aware of certain facts like sanitation, bad effects of superstitions, bride-burning, dowry-system, witch-killing etc. All the social evils including women-related ones can easily be removed through these. Hence over all development of the country is not possible without the empowerment of women. There was a time when a woman's identity was related to that of her husband and in-laws, but now time has come to be self-luminous with their own glow, but not through the glory of their husband and in-laws. In the *Meghnādvadha* Madhusūdana Datta has painted the picture of Pramīlā in such a way as if she belongs to honourable race which is to be boasted of. That is why; she is found declaring: "*Rāvaṇ śvaśur mama Meghnād svāmī/ Āmi ki ḍarai sakhi bhikhāri Rāghave?*" (That is, Ravan is my father-in-law and Meghnad is the husband. Am I in a position to be fearful from the beggar Raghava or Ramachandra?). In this statement Pramīlā is painted in such a manner that she is more interested in declaring herself as belonging to blue blood where both the husband and father-in-law are great heroes. In comparison to their heroism Ramachandra is nothing but a beggar. From such statement of her it may seem to others that woman-

in-general prefers to be proud of their blue blood. It may be taken as tantamount to say that they have nothing of their own in their credit so that they can boast of. But now in the age of women's empowerment it should be kept in view that women have enormous power and ability of their own. To be proud of their race is a good thing no doubt, but at the same time they should declare themselves as powerful as other members of the race or family. In fact, it should be made public that in speech and deeds that they are in no way less powerful or incompetent than the male-members and hence they have to prove their own existence through the light of their own grace, which is more essential, now-a-days. If they have such a confidence, power given to them will be utilized for the welfare of the women as well as the country. I am personally looking forward towards this 'dawn' of their own glorious identity lost now-a-days due to various socio-political problems.

Notes and References

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